

WHERE ARE WE? WHERE DO WE GO?--IN SLUM CLEARANCE  
AND PUBLIC HOUSING

Remarks to

"A Day at Public Housing" (December 15, 1959)  
St. Louis Housing and Land Clearance Authority

By

Nicholas J. Demerath\*

To approach the wide open and general subject assigned in the program let us look at public housing and the community by means of four questions: First, what are we dealing with? Second, how do St. Louisans see it? Third, what do we care? And fourth, what can be done? If I appear dogmatic and sketchy, it is because my job, like the other speakers this morning, is to stimulate discussion and, hopefully, action. And I must say my piece in 30 minutes. If I misunderstand our problem, I hope you will set me straight out of your more intimate knowledge of the projects, the tenants, the agencies and the management.

What are we dealing with?

Our immediate, local focus today is the well-being of about 30,000 people who are tenants of a landlord who, under the present housing act, can do little more than collect rents and provide the barest maintenance and tenant services. More broadly, our problem is but one instance of our number one national problem: Can we muster a leadership in our cities, in our state capitols and in Washington that will give us the kind of public services and expenditures we must have if our economy and society are to survive? For the past 15 years we have been on a national binge, a post-war party at the neglect and expense of the commonweal and, as the economists say, "the public sectors" of the

---

\*Director, Social Science Institute, Washington University

economy. And of all the things we have neglected, the housing of the lowest income families must be among the worst, along with their education and health care.

In our big cities we have built many multi-million dollar ghettos as slum-clearance. In our construction of cavernous 15-20 story barracks we have learned the hard way of what so many architects and social workers told us all along; new buildings by themselves are not the answer, and the higher they are, the more inadequate and uneconomical they are, especially for the poor, it seems.

In St. Louis as in other cities we are simply reaping the predictable fruit of architectural bungling and "chintzey" public financing since 1947, and the successes of the hard working anti-housing lobby in Washington, and perhaps nearer home.

Crime and delinquency, mainly in the high-rise projects, which the recent Grand jury, the St. Louis police, and most of us here today correctly view with alarm, are symptoms of the social slums that have grown up in the new ghettos. True, there is no discrimination along the lines of race or creed, at least nominally and legally. But admission is determined by income level and displaced status. It is a means test that operates to select the poorest in skills, in schooling and income, a disproportionate number being Negro in St. Louis. It is precisely the population that is least able to care for itself politically, economically, domestically.

The high-rise buildings have left so much to be desired in terms of tenant life that the St. Louis Housing Authority plans very little more

of this type construction. So the question becomes, how can the high buildings already built, which represent an investment of many millions of dollars, be utilized to more nearly provide the 'decent, safe, and sanitary housing' that was originally envisioned? And where do we go from here in the re-housing job that has only begun. Here in St. Louis it is high time that we turn more attention from care of the automobile to care of disadvantaged human beings, that we include in our zeal for "Downtown St. Louis" all the people who will live, work and buy there.

How do St. Louisans see public housing?

Regretfully I have no public opinion poll to report. However, I have tried to recall the spontaneous comments which I have heard since moving to St. Louis a little more than three years ago, and in the last couple of weeks I have made it a point to ask a few people how they and their friends regard St. Louis public housing. In the first place, of course, there seems to be the great majority of us who have no opinion and no perception other than an awareness that there are some conspicuously big buildings and a few smaller buildings called "housing projects" which are for the poor who, God help them, move out when they can. Where they move and into what conditions few know about. That so many seem to think the new Plaza apartments are more of the same suggests a confusion as to what is urban renewal, land clearance, urban redevelopment, public housing, and a corresponding indifference as well perhaps.

Then there are those whom we may call "the smug ones" who say, "Look at those new buildings. The old city is sure being changed. It

costs up taxpayers some big dough but think how much better off the people are than they were in the old slums they've torn down. I guess that's alright--we have to take care of the shiftless somehow. It sure makes the town look better, too." And then they drive on--leaving matters up to 'them', and not caring to learn the facts.

Third, there are the critics, both friends and opponents of public housing. Most of us here today are probably friendly critics. But the opponents, viewing widely publicized crime at Pruitt-Igoe and growing vacancy rates, see simply more evidence that "if you give 'em good housing, they will only ruin it. They don't know any better." You will recall it used to be, "They all put their coal in the bath tub;" one of the "myths of public housing". Nathan Strauss dubbed it. The friendly critics are probably inclined and entitled to the view, "We told you so." Certainly it is true that many of our best architect-planners, social workers, and housing specialists have said all along that high-rise buildings would produce low level family and community life.

Next there are the potential tenants or the one-time tenants who go about saying that the projects are not safe, that there are janitors who break into the apartments and steal when the tenants are away, and so on. And finally, there is the management of our public housing who are frustrated and puzzled enough to call this conference. They recognize the needs and the problems--when they get the time to think about them. They know they alone can change the situation very little.

What do we care?

Up to now the citizenry has cared very little. After all, most of us think 'we never had it so good', so why should we concern ourselves about a 'do-gooder' operation that doesn't affect very many? Because the community at large is affected and has numerous interests in 'decent, safe, and sanitary housing'. Because so much of our present housing facility, private and public, does not now provide such housing. Because the present housing law and funds deny the St. Louis Housing Authority, like others elsewhere, the wherewithal to be more than a landlord instead of the great social and economic instrumentality it could be. Because the future of St. Louis hinges so much on the adjustment of those who come to live in the public housing projects, as you with the health, welfare, and educational agencies know better than I.

And there is another reason that many of our 'leading citizens' either discount or don't consider. I refer to the strictly economic reason why we should care about public housing families. The 30,000 occupants of these projects today, and there will be more next year and the year after that, represent buying power; they are consumers. They are man-power; workers with skill and productive capacities. The potentials to the economic life of the St. Louis region and to downtown St. Louis, in particular, are so great that we cannot afford their underdevelopment. We have, you see, what is in effect an 'underdeveloped country' in our front yard. Our conservative business elite ought to see new potentials here, especially since the costs of non-development to taxpayers and business alike are so great.

What can be done?

In the first place, the Congress, the White House, and the Housing and Home Finance Agency can get for housing authorities across the country the funds with which they can discharge the mandate which originally characterized the public housing movement in this country. Administrative procedures which demand a means test according to income, and which prohibit the authorities from performing needed social service work should be altered or abandoned.

Next April the 1960 census will be taken and it will probably show something over 180 million Americans, with well over 100 million living in cities and about 46 million in the country but not on farms. Less than 20 million of us still live on farms. Nevertheless, in the current U.S. budget these 20 million are getting just about \$6 billion from the Federal treasury, which comes to about \$1,160 for each farm family in the form of outright cash, farm price supports, and various rewards for not plating, for conservation, and the like. In the same budget there is a mere \$100 million for urban renewal, and little more than talk for slum clearance.

In his veto message last spring the President made clear his disapproval of public housing as well as federal aid to education. Indeed, his message was, in the opinion of some people, unusually bitter for a man who is generally moderate and soft spoken. And his position on budgets and legislation at home stands in marked contrast to the noble sentiments he expressed in New Delhi last week; calling for a "noble war" in behalf of "food, family, friendship, and freedom". I submit that the families of our low-income urban immigrants need governmental and voluntary

assistance no less than the poor of India and the rest of the world.

By action locally through voluntary agencies, and with funds from municipal budgets also, we would do well, I think, to saturate our public housing projects, perhaps on an experimental basis, with health and welfare services on a neighborhood and community basis. The recent announcement by one of the AME churches that they will provide a recreation center near one of our projects is surely a step in the right direction. In all these endeavors, involvement of project occupants is of the essence. Incentive and reward systems that are as genuine as they are emotionally supportive should be devised. More group life, at the same time, is equally essential. These things cannot be done by democratic process unaided, particularly where the tenants lack experience in such matters. The churches, the unions, the schools, the family and youth serving agencies should all be involved on a carefully coordinated basis. And the best landscape architects and other physical design artists should work to eliminate the bleak wastelands which are now too frequent. (Compare Cochran high-rise and garden apartments, for instance.) Responsibility for site care and development should be assigned the tenants, old and young--gardens, playing fields, parks, etc.

Indispensably important at the same time is a strengthening of what is sometimes called the "socialization" process. It seems to be a rule of human behavior in the U.S. that those who enjoy high standards of living, and who aspire thereto, are less deviant, less criminally inclined than the more disadvantaged ones. These aspirations, these skills and know-how are provided, not so much by education in the school and classroom, but by person-to-person contact and force of example. The implication

here is that there should be more mixture in our projects of the advantaged and the disadvantaged, of those who aspire to "improve" themselves and those who have yet to acquire such ambitions and knowledge.

The projects might well be opened to young business and professional people, or to older couples whose children have left and who would like to put aside something of a nest-egg in their latter years by living in low-rent quarters. Such occupants by their very presence and participation in project life could provide the examples of which we speak. On this point and the fallacy of a needs test, I agree with Msgr. O'Grady of the National Conference of Catholic Charities. He told Congress, who ignored him,

I have always been strongly opposed to a needs test for the admission of families to public housing units. I believe that a needs test is demoralizing. I believe that bringing together into one community a considerable number of relief families would create a very unnatural community. I believe that the community as created would bear many of the earmarks of a poorhouse. It would not have the kind of leadership that a community needs. Very many relief families are broken families.... There is nobody in such a family who can take any large part in community activities....

Of absolutely fundamental importance, economic discrimination against the Negro in trade unions and among numerous employers in St. Louis should be curbed. Without this, none of the efforts noted above can be really effective. The Urban League's surveys show repeatedly that not



only is the Negro in St. Louis the last to be hired and the first to be fired, but he finds it almost impossible to learn certain trades because of the unions' restrictions (countenanced by the schools) in their apprentice program. Those downtown stores and other employers who are dropping barriers should be singled out for favorable attention.

The Housing Authority's plan to build few more high-rise apartments is commendable. Except for the aged, perhaps, nor more should be built. There should be guards and other tough controls placed on criminal behavior, though these treat symptoms rather than the disease itself. For, as Harrison Salisbury observes, police are not needed as much as management and design with a social concept.

The architectural design and concept of many low-rent housing projects has fallen as low as the social concept. Why should we build forbidding twenty-story barracks, devoid of human facilities, barren of stores and service establishments, naked of beauty? Do we think the poor do not deserve cleanliness of line, artistry of setting? Is it really true that economy and loveliness are incompatible?

Nowhere in the world except in Russia or Albania have I seen public housing so ungracious, so lacking in imagination, so denuded of the amenities of life. The experience of some of the New York projects and of such cities as Newark has shown that enlightened management can transform housing projects in a mere matter of months from social cankers to media for resolving tensions, for enabling adults and adolescents alike to live in comfort and ease.

Housing projects can be made bastions of social order.

This requires not police. Not new rules. Not crackdowns.

Not evictions. Not even much money. It requires social

imagination, a sense of responsibility, a desire for a

healthy community and a feeling for people which transcends

vicious political bureaucracy.\*

---

\*The Shook-Up Generation, New York: Fawcett World Library (A Crest Reprint), 1959, p. 169.